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ASTRID BÖGER

Facing Depression in 20th-Century American Photography

Abstract: This essay focuses on 20th-century portrait photography, and argues that the facial portrait has become one of the most productive conventions in the history of the medium. It considers the social documentary work of Lewis Hine, as well as Dorothea Lange's and Walker Evans's government-sponsored photography of the Depression. Portraits by Robert Frank and Richard Avedon created in the context of, but also independently from, The New York School of Photography are discussed subsequently. The images considered here have in common that they mobilize the viewer's affective response, while at the same time they negotiate the shifting relationship between the photographer, his or her subject, and the viewer. Finally, Avedon's project *In the American West, 1979-1984* is presented as a basis to question the (conventional) position of the human subject as the object of the photographer's look, as Avedon conceives of photo portraiture as an essentially mutual, performative act.

1. Introduction

"A Portrait is not a likeness."[1] The person credited with this somewhat surprising statement certainly knew what he was talking about: world-famous for his avant-garde fashion photography frequently reproduced in glossy magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue* as well as, more recently, *The New Yorker*, Richard Avedon was able to reconcile commercial fashion photography with his other artistic interests throughout his career.[2] And no-one would think twice if Avedon's comment on the uncertain truth value of photographic portraiture referred to his fashion work. Fashion is, after all, in large measure about the creation of

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1 Cf. Avedon's "Foreword" to exhibition catalogue *In the American West, 1979-1984*, n.p. The exhibition opened at the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, in 1985, and subsequently traveled to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Phoenix Art Museum, the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art, and The High Museum of Art, Atlanta. In 2001, it was shown at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany, with further venues in Granada, Barcelona, and Madrid.

2 Cf., for example, Avedon's comments made in a 1991 interview: "For about the first twenty years of my life as a photographer, photographs of fashion were an expression of much of what I knew about surface, women, and the allure and cruelty of society. A life can begin anywhere, and I was completely able to use fashion photography as easily as street pictures or pictures of the Civil Rights movement or the mental institution to express what I felt about being any one of us" (Livingston 1992, 338).

fantasy, not reality in a strict sense. It seems significant, however, that his statement reappeared in the context of a recent (2001) exhibition of the portrait series *In the American West, 1979-1984*, a collection of stark, quasi-documentary photographs of ordinary men and women Avedon had encountered during his travels across the country some twenty years ago. Originally commissioned by the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, one aim of the project was to portray people in 'The West' during a period of economic renewal due to the forceful exploitation of natural resources that resulted from the energy crisis of the 1970s. Eventually, though, as the resources were used up or workforces shifted elsewhere this period of economic activity was followed by the decline of many of the areas in question a few years later. Avedon's portraits tend to give a human face especially to the latter development,[3] and when they were first exhibited in 1985 the show was regarded an "insult to the West" (cf. Lütgens 2001, 125) by many, causing intense public controversy at the time.

In the American West marks both continuity with, and a departure from, various strands of photography in America. Bearing family resemblance to the 'straight' approach developed by Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand and others at the beginning of the 20th century, Avedon's portraits also take up the social documentary tradition which Lewis Hine introduced in America at around the same time and which was developed further during the Great Depression. This was done, for instance, by a group of photographers working for the government, most notably Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, who were on staff of the Farm Security Administration for some time during the agency's early phase (1935-37).[4] Another context in which Avedon's work is often seen is the loosely connected group of artists referred to as The New York School. Encompassing, among others (and apart from Avedon himself), such diverse individuals as Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, Alexey Brodovitch, and Helen Levitt, this group also formed in the 1930s and soon became a vortex of artistic creativity, whose impact on the visual culture of the 20th century has only in recent years begun to be fully recognized.[5]

These different moments in photographic portraiture raise a set of critical questions regarding the portrait vis-à-vis other photographic conventions. As a form of evidence, the photo portrait is closely connected to social history. At the same time it suggests subjectivity, negotiating the shifting relationship between the photographer, his or her subject, and the viewer. In the history of portraiture, images of people have served many varying purposes, depending on social conventions, artistic styles and techniques, as well as individual and collective

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3 For background information see Wilson 1985, n.p.

4 Apart from Evans and Lange, the group of photographers working for the FSA between 1935 and 1941 included Carl Mydans, Ben Shahn, Arthur Rothstein, Theodor Jung, Paul Carter, Russell Lee, Marion Post Wolcott, Gordon Parks, Marjorie Collins, Jack Delano, John Collier, Jr., John Vachon, and Esther Bubley.

5 For a comprehensive portrait of The New York School see Livingston 1992, 273-8, who also discusses Lewis Hine and Evans (as well as Henri Cartier-Bresson) as progenitors of The New York School.

needs, to name but the most obvious circumstantial factors. Michael Fried has introduced the terms *absorption* and *theatricality*, to discuss what he perceives as two major ideals that have historically characterized (French) portraiture and, in his analysis, become especially prominent since the 18th century. Complicating Pierre Bourdieu's observation that the lower classes have always tended to imitate the tastes and fashions of the upper strata of the social hierarchy (cf. Bourdieu 1985), Fried's analysis suggests, rather, that the bourgeois ideal of contemplative absorption was established in counterdistinction to aristocratic theatricality.[6] Furthermore, John Tagg showed how the photographic portrait in particular became a highly desirable object for members of the rising middle classes, to indicate one's social status in the 19th century (cf. Tagg 1988, 37-8). In this essay I will attempt to show that over the course of the 20th century, photographic portraiture, while retaining at least traces of both aspects, theatricality and absorption, has added a third important function, namely, *affect*.[7] Addressing the viewer for the most part directly, photo portraits have the power to move viewers into greater awareness of a particular situation, making it possible for them to face it intimately, while yet remaining at a comfortable distance. It is important, however, to realize that the viewers' emotions are usually appealed to via the exposure of the subjects photographed. Hence, while 20th-century photographic portraiture continued the process of democratizing visual culture described by Fried and others, by including groups of people previously excluded from it, this was generally achieved at the expense of new divisions of power, more often than not implying a clear imbalance between the viewers and the less fortunate objects of their gaze (cf. Rosler 1989, 303-41).

There are other reasons why the facial portrait became such a staple of contemporary photography. Tending toward the iconic, it has the capacity to both embody and transcend historical signification. In this sense as well, a portrait is indeed "not a likeness," but always refers to something beyond mere representation. Considering both its emotive potential *and* its capacity to transcend personal and historical signification, it should come as no surprise that the facial portrait, with its long tradition in visual culture, has become such a preeminent format throughout the photography of the 20th century. Precisely because it has the power to create spaces of distanced familiarity even in the face of dire crisis, the photo portrait has proved to be one of the most productive conventions, in America as elsewhere, in the history of the medium.

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[6] This is, admittedly, a rather simplified shorthand version of Fried's complex analysis. Cf. Fried 1980. See also Kappelhoff 2001, 9-41.

[7] One inspiration for this idea was Gilles Deleuze's discussion of the Bergsonian definition of affect in relation to film theory, and particularly the works of S.M. Eisenstein and D.W. Griffiths (cf. Deleuze 1986, 87-101).

2. Lewis Hine

Lewis Hine is often credited with being among the first documentary photographers in America (cf. Newhall 1993, 235). His motives were thoroughly melioristic, as his sympathies always lay with the underprivileged, whose harsh lives he wanted to publicize and thereby, ideally, help improve through his work. In John Szarkowski's phrase, Hine "was a dedicated and committed photographer who since the first decade of the century had described the American industrial system from the bottom, *in terms of the lives and faces of the workers* on whose muscle and skill it rested" (Szarkowski 1989, 168; emphasis added). Significantly though, and despite all claims of the documentary gesture to capture reality authentically, Hine never thought of his photographs as objective records; instead, he conceived of his work as a subjective effort, whose purpose was to arouse feelings of sympathy in potential viewers. Consequently, he referred to the actual images as "human documents" and "photo-interpretations," as Beaumont Newhall explains (Newhall 1993, 235).

Fig. 1: Lewis Hine, *Young Russian Jewess at Ellis Island, New York, 1905*. George Eastman House, Rochester, New York.

Hine's "human documents" are, with some exceptions,[8] portraits of people whom he encountered in the urban centers of New York City. Unlike the bourgeois portrait tradition where people were shown comfortably at home or in places that look as if they could have been homes (even if somewhat idealized and generalized), Hine's subjects are typically photographed within specific environments clearly not connected with their own personal space. A photograph of a "young Russian Jewess at Ellis Island" (fig. 1) from 1905 is a good example. We look directly into the young woman's face, which is shown off center from a medium-close distance and at almost eye-level. Even though she is close enough to the camera to interact with it, she does *not* return its gaze, but looks off into the distance, with an unfocused expression, so that any actual visual

[8] Among the exceptions are, for example, Hine's famous photographs of working children in the "Carolina Cotton Mill" series from 1908, as well as the lesser-known series on post-WWI Europe that he did when working for the Red Cross in 1918. See Kaplan 1988.

dialogue is averted. The fact that the woman's seemingly static body is shown by itself in a large, empty and industrial-looking hall (where no doubt there were ordinarily huge crowds) adds to the impression of forlornness. Depicting a young woman facing an uncertain future in such a way, the image leads viewers toward greater awareness of the hardships of immigration. It derives much of its power from the fact that it allows for viewer identification: one can imagine what it would be like to be in such a place and facing such circumstances (unlike in the case of Jacob Riis's images of immigrants in the south of Manhattan in the late 1880s, which elicited at best pity and, more often, disgust in viewers rather than sympathy; cf. Kaplan 1988, 22). As Daile Kaplan observes about Hine's portraits, "there are both vulnerability and dignity in people's expressions that invite rather than intimidate the viewer" (Kaplan 1988, 20).

The second image by Hine included here, "Bowery Mission Bread Line" from 1906 (fig. 2), speaks a different visual language, but to equally strong effect. We see a group of seven men whose figures fill nearly three quarters of the image (the person to the left is not fully shown, which suggests that the group was larger than the camera frame permitted, an impression also underscored by the fact that the group does not actually form a line but rather a crowd). The men appear to be waiting, presumably for their turn, which is emphasized by five men looking in the same direction to the left, behind the camera. Two of the men, however, look directly into the camera and thus appear to be facing the viewer directly. A classic device inviting viewer identification, the effect is all the more striking because the two men have rather confident expressions, which are reinforced by the fact that the person to the right is shown in sharp focus and thus "stands

Fig. 2: Lewis Hine, *Bowery Mission Bread Line, New York, 1906.* Museum of Modern Art, New York.

out," even though only part of his face is shown behind another man's back. It seems significant, though, that the entire group resists facile stereotyping. The men are shown properly if modestly dressed, while the tall figure to the left of the center has a distinct air of self-assurance. One reading of the image would suggest that if average- and even decent-looking men such as these could be so affected by misfortune as to become dependent on social welfare, this could happen to anyone. Despite obvious differences in style and rhetoric, both images by Hine have in common that they confront viewers with certain real problems of the time, such as the precarious situation of immigrants as they were (or were not) absorbed into the national labor force and, by implication, into American culture at large. Hine clearly avoided the spectacular approach toward underprivileged subjects which Riis's work has come to represent, and favored a more subdued style compatible with a bourgeois aesthetic instead. Thus, while Hine's images appeal to the viewer's emotions as well, they show *composed* subjects that invite identification rather than distance. Of course, when Szarkowski observes that "the vocabulary of his pictures is so plain and transparent, so free of rhetoric, that we are free to regard them as life itself,"[9] he is overlooking the fact that the "transparency" of Hine's images is really their greatest asset: a rhetoric of unspectacular life-likeness, which politely asks 'us' for 'our' attention rather than shocking viewers into awareness, or anything else.

3. Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans

In America, documentary photography came into its own during the 1930s, when photographers working for New Deal agencies such as the Farm Security Administration (FSA) traveled across the country to produce a visual record of the devastations of the Depression, especially in the rural South.[10] As in the earlier case of Hine's work, documentary is once again best understood not so much as an objective record, but as an instrument to influence the public perception of reality. As Pete Daniel and Sally Stein maintain, "government photography was intended to influence public policy and opinion; indeed, that was its reason for being."[11] For this purpose, between 1935 and 1941 some 270,000 exposures were made by staff photographers for the FSA (which was just one of many branches of government to keep photographers on payroll), of which "only" some 88,000 are now included in the Prints and Photographs Division at the Library of Congress – still too many by far to be considered individually.[12]

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9 Cf. Szarkowski 1989, 172: "Hine's pictures [here compared to Stieglitz's] are of course also transformations – are merely photographs: intuitive resolutions of problems that offer imponderably complex options – but the vocabulary of his pictures is so plain and transparent, so free of rhetoric, that we are free to regard them as life itself."

10 Several ideas for this section are taken from Böger 2001; see especially the chapter on "The Iconicity of New Deal Representations," 59-75.

11 Daniel / Stein 1987, xi. On the rhetoric of the FSA images, see Stange 1987, 1-35.

12 The sheer number of the images has often been commented on. Olaf Hansen for instance called the archive "practically unusable" ("praktisch unbenutzbar"); Hansen 1981, n.p. Of

While the subjects of FSA photography were extremely varied, and ranged from images of harsh poverty to those of new hope through (federal) employment, technical progress, or communal enjoyment[13] – all of which were covered widely and in diverse ways – the preferred approach was highly stylized. At least this is the case with those images that have become, through seemingly endless repetition, veritable *icons* of the Great Depression, almost all of which are facial portraits. Looking back on the collection of FSA photographs in 1973, its former director Roy Stryker writes:

> The faces to me were the most significant part of the file. When a man is down and they have taken his land and his home – everything he spent his life working for – he's going to have the expression of tragedy permanently on his face. But I have always believed that the American people have the ability to endure. And that is in those faces, too. [...] You see something in those faces that transcends misery. (Stryker / Wood 1973, 14)

Facial portraits lend themselves to becoming projections of our own inner thoughts and feelings, while the actual existences of the people depicted are de-emphasized. The notion of creating photographic abstractions from lived experiences is also expressed by Naomi Rosenblum, who said of Dorothea Lange's portraits that they "fused together concept, emotion and form to invest the modernist idea with a human face and to stand as metaphors for social dislocation" (Rosenblum 1998, 17). Lange's renditions of the human face are famous for many reasons, but it is their inherent humanist rhetoric which has drawn the most commentary. As John Szarkowski writes,

> Almost all of her pictures are of people, and a remarkably high percentage of those people are handsome, even if troubled and worn. We see them – and we are meant to see them – as people of exceptional value, proud and independent and competent, who are unlikely to ask for help, but who clearly deserve it. (Szarkowski 1989, 216)

The best-known example of Lange's work is, of course, her famous portrait of the "Migrant Mother."[14] But her image of a "Migratory Cotton Picker" made in Arizona in 1940 (fig. 3) appeals to viewers in a similar way, i.e., through its aesthetic treatment of the subject shown from close-up. The photograph is effectively composed, placing (in the cropped version) the man's upright figure in the middle while adding a horizontal axis through the bent arm held in front of the mouth with the open palm turned toward the camera. In another exposure made just moments before the man wore a hat which cast a dark shadow over his entire face, but the removal of the hat for the second exposure makes for a more even distribution of light across the man's facial features, which are indeed beautiful. Transcending the denotative level of personal appearance though, the image

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course, access to and use of the FSA file has been greatly improved since much of it has been digitized and made available online, through the Library of Congress' *American Memory* website at <http://memory.loc.gov> (May 17, 2006).

13 The most comprehensive survey to date is Fleischhauer / Brannan 1988; cf. also Nye 1990, 254-66.

14 "Migrant Mother" ranks among the most-reproduced and discussed images in the history of photography. See, for example, Price / Wells 2000, 35-45.

achieves iconic status through the reduction of its content *and* formal elements to two symbolic elements: the face and the hands of a worker, seen in broad daylight. Significantly, the palm of the hand *in front of the face* is emphasized in this image rather than the face itself, presenting a flat surface on which certain meanings – hard work, closeness to the land, adherence to a traditional way of life – are inscribed in the form of deep lines and traces of soil. Thus, the image provides a rather literal surface which viewers are free to 'read.'

In comparison to Lange, Walker Evans's portraits tend to be more reticent and enigmatic, while not subscribing to conventional notions of beauty. Rather than presenting us with a certain reality, he prefers to confront viewers with surfaces which require conscious deciphering to render any meaning at all. It can be argued that Evans's use of the conventional portrait style – 'straight' views of people looking directly at the camera, consciously posing for it – functions as an ironic commentary on the social status ascribed to it, or it can be read as a criti-

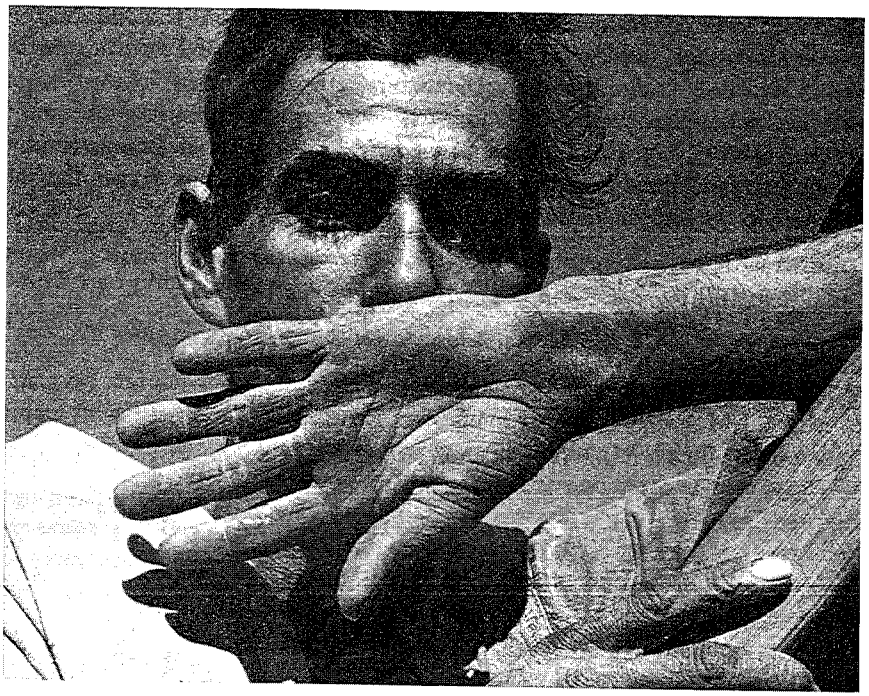

Fig. 3: Dorothea Lange, *Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona, 1940*. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.

cism of the liberal condescension of more typical New Deal imagery. A good example is Evans's well-known photograph of "Allie Mae Burroughs, Wife of Cotton Sharecropper" made in Alabama in 1936 (fig. 4), which W.J.T. Mitchell describes as follows:

> The portrait [...] becomes a purely formal study of flatness and worn, "graven" surfaces: the lines of her face, the weathered grain of the boards, the faded dress, the taut strands of her hair, the gravity of her expression all merge into a visual complex that is hauntingly beautiful and enigmatic. She becomes an "icon" [...], a pure aesthetic object, liberated from contingency and circumstance into a space of pure contemplation, the Mona Lisa of the Depression. (Mitchell 1994, 293-4)

Reducing denotation to a minimum and de-emphasizing contextuality, the meaning of the portrait assumes a universal dimension as a "pure aesthetic object" or icon – a quality which can be observed in most of the other famous examples of New Deal photography as well (such as, for instance, Russell Lee's "Hands of the Wife of a Homesteader," or Gordon Parks' "American Gothic"). By focusing on the universal meanings of an image, the historical specificity of the encounter between the photographer and his or her subject is effaced. Rather, the faces become surfaces upon which the viewer can project his or her own thoughts and emotions. Consequently, these images considered icons no longer seem to require historical context in order to be comprehensible in a general way – at least within the specific ideological universe of liberal documentary, that is,[15] and its idealizing aesthetic which favors the composure of impoverished people seen from close-up over any other format, perhaps because it is closest in style to the ideal of absorption familiar from bourgeois portraiture.

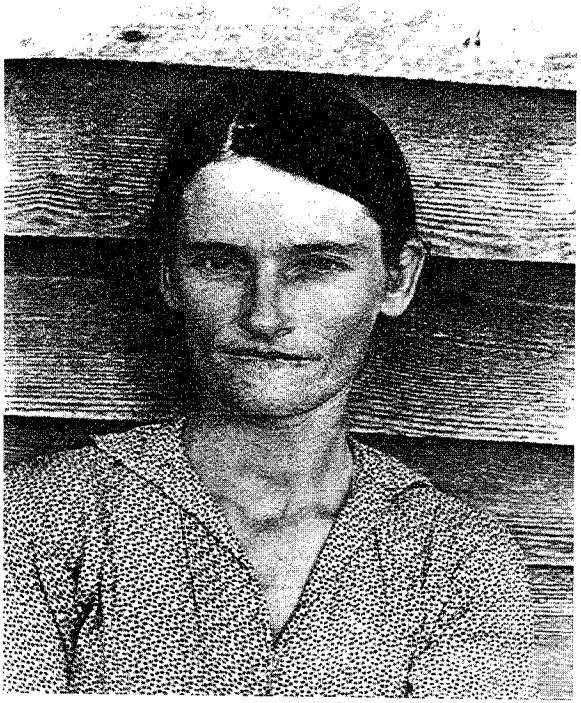

Fig. 4: Walker Evans, *Allie Mae Burroughs, Wife of Cotton Sharecropper, Alabama, 1936.* Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, # LC-USF 342-008139-A.

[15] Many aspects will of course not be clear from these images. Cf. Rosler 1989, 307: "In the liberal documentary, poverty and oppression are almost invariably equated with misfortunes caused by natural disasters: casuality [sic!] is vague, blame is not assigned, fate cannot be overcome."

Both Evans and Lange also used the traditional format of the group portrait in their work. When looking at "Bud Fields and His Family" (fig. 5) photographed by Evans in 1936, one is simultaneously struck by the conventionality of this

Fig. 5: Walker Evans, *Bud Fields and His Family, Alabama, 1936.* Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, # LC-USF 342-008147-A.

image and by how it subverts ways we typically perceive family photographs. The family is shown at home, seated more or less in the usual order with the father at the center and his wife, mother (or mother-in-law) and children at his side. While the general contents of the image – a family at home – comply with the conventional family portrait style (on Evans's use of the family portrait style, see also Böger 1994, 102-4), the viewer is immediately struck by the impoverished circumstances of the people in it, which is still underscored by their poor clothing (or, indeed, the lack thereof, as in the case of the youngest child) and the overall makeshift character of their home. By adhering to the conventions of formalized portraiture but simultaneously exposing both the poverty and the dignity of his subjects, Evans manages to call into question any easy categorization of 'us versus them.' At the same time, he seems to defy liberal efforts at appropriating 'the other' for one's own well-intentioned causes. This gesture, atypical of

more ordinary Depression photography, is all the more effective as it tacitly critiques some of the basic assumptions of New Deal thinking and aesthetics.

Unlike Evans, Dorothea Lange did not shy away from the more directly political implications of her work. For instance, some of her group portraits seem to suggest the potential power of collectivity, as in the case of "Tenant Farmers without Farms, Hardeman County, Texas, 1937" (fig. 6). The frame is evenly filled

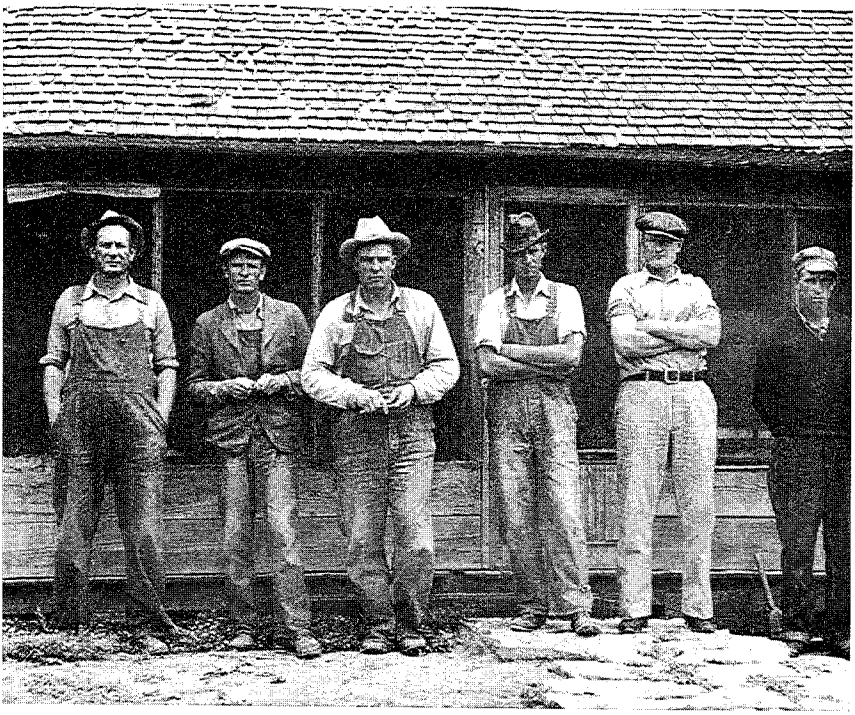

Fig. 6: Dorothea Lange, *Tenant Farmers without Farms, Hardeman County, Texas, 1937.* Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, # LC-USF 341-017265-C.

by six men facing the camera straight-on. All of them are clad in clothing suitable for farm work, and the men appear to be impatiently waiting to get to it. The gloomy expressions on their faces, however, in combination with the idle, frontal postures suggest that any activities have been arrested and their (common or individual) goals thwarted. Not subscribing to the more traditional visual conventions of portraiture emphasizing theatricality, absorption, or affect in a way recognizable to viewers, the image leaves open what may happen next: continued inactivity or collective action. Amazingly, depending on one's own viewpoint the impression can either be one of vague threat or a comfortable sense of order. Lange here uses the group portrait convention in such a way that for a moment anything seems possible.

4. Robert Frank

The effect Robert Frank's photo book *The Americans* (published in France in 1958 and a year later in America) had on viewers has often been described as a kind of shock (cf. Szarkowski quoted in Livingston 1992, 308), which did not prevent it from securing Frank's position in the American art scene considered pivotal by many. As Jane Livingston writes, "almost overnight Frank became a symbol of a new generation of photography and film" (Livingston 1992, 304). In terms of its layout and especially the complex groupings of images, as well as its general focus on commonplace American subjects (and also quite simply its title) *The Americans* refers back to Walker Evans's 1938 book and accompanying exhibition *American Photographs*.[16] Compared to Evans's 'straight' and unobtrusive style, however, Frank's approach is fundamentally different. His views of Americans are harshly direct, full of tension, and they certainly do not invite the distanced, contemplative attitude Evans's images tend to evoke. In fact, many images in *The Americans* reveal a very subjective viewpoint. An image such as "Canal Street – New Orleans" (fig. 7), for instance, puts viewers right into the crowded city scene depicted: everyone appears on the way somewhere, busily moving in various directions and ignoring everyone else out of habit or necessity. And as even the photographer's presence remains unacknowledged despite his physical proximity to the scene (except for a fleeting instance of eye-contact with the tall male figure to the left), this image could not fail to speak to viewers very eloquently of the anonymity and the ordinary chaos of everyday life in urban America.

Fig. 7: Robert Frank, *Canal Street, New Orleans, c. 1958.*

A sense of proximity without the potential gratification of actual human contact is invoked in several other images in *The Americans* as well. "U.S. Highway 91, Leaving Blackfoot, Idaho" (fig. 8) is another good example. The photographer appears to be sharing the space of his two subjects, sitting in their car and aiming his camera directly at them, or else he might have been standing just outside their window, next to the man in the co-driver's seat. The apparent lack of contact with the men, who do not acknowledge the photographer's presence at all despite a sense of physical closeness, in combination with the denial of a clearly

[16] Comparisons between Evans's and Frank's work have variously been made. Frank himself acknowledged the influence Evans had on him (Livingston 1992, 307).

recognizable point of view, make the image quite mysterious. Like most of Frank's work, it looks somewhat unrefined and spontaneously shot rather than carefully composed. The fleetingness of form and technique generally corresponds with the contents of Frank's images – something he has in common with the other photographers generally grouped together under The New York School.[17] What gives this group its distinct style is not so much their preferred technique (spontaneous, 'candid' shots made with fast, small-format cameras under available light conditions; cf. Livingston 1992, 259), or any particular subject matter (which is too varied to be easily summarized, except for generally focusing on ordinary life in America, where the ordinary borders on the marginal), but the mood encapsulated in their images, in other words, the feelings they are capable of producing in viewers. Thus, Jane Livingston writes about *The Americans* that

Fig. 8: Robert Frank, *U.S. Highway 91, Leaving Blackfoot, Idaho, c. 1958.*

> it describes, or essentializes, something about postwar America itself, though not an America characterized by prosperity, confidence, and hope. Rather, some other truth about this culture is revealed. Something new is declared about the uprootedness, and often the *unassimilation*, of much of America's citizenry, something about the barrenness of the landscape and the exhaustion or resignation of the people in it. Yet these qualities are never communicated by overtly theatrical means. By concentrating on the anticlimactic, Frank evinces a strong feeling for the tough and yet vulnerable face of working- and middle-class America, which penetrates cumulatively to the viewer of this book. (Livingston 1992, 307)

One reason why viewers were (and continue to be) so affected by Frank's images is the raw and – still – new quality Livingston describes.[18] Their vaguely disconcerting effect is often experienced on the level of feeling rather than conscious perception, as they deny a sense of composition, in terms of both subject and form. Instead, they seem to evoke a sense of pure, undirected affect, which does not translate into any recognizable agenda – indeed, Frank's images appear to have no 'message' at all. Consequently, unlike the subjects of liberal documentary, they do not appeal to our emotions via a sense of benign superiority or a guil-

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[17] These are Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, Alexey Brodovitch, Ted Croner, Bruce Davidson, Don Donaghy, Louis Faurer, Robert Frank, Sid Grossman, William Klein, Saul Leiter, Leon Levinstein, Helen Levitt, Lisette Model, David Vestal, and Weegee; see Livingston 1992 for biographical and background information.

[18] Cf. Deleuze 1986, 99: "[T]he affect is the 'new' and new affects are ceaselessly created, notably by the work of art."

ty conscience. Rather, they throw into our faces the inconsistencies and the cacophonies as well as some of the beauty of lives that look a bit too familiar not to be alienating when viewed from up close. What makes Frank's portraits so powerful (as well as potentially depressing), though, is the impression they convey that real human contact is impossible, as close as one may get.

5. Richard Avedon

"The photograph is both a cultural tool which has been commodified as well as a tool that has been used to express commodity culture through advertisements and other marketing material," writes Anandi Ramamurthy (2000, 165). Few photographic oeuvres seem to illustrate the close link between the dominance of 20th-century commodity culture and the photographic medium as impressively as Avedon's.[19] Throughout his career, which began in the early 1940s, he has worked in several photographic fields, most notably in fashion and advertising, but also pursued work in portrait and documentary photography.[20] Like many other artists, Avedon was able to support his more exclusively artistic endeavors, like portraiture, through commercial work (cf. Beardsley 1992, 351). Unlike others, however, "he has seemed to avoid the sense of conflict between two identities, breadwinner vs. artist," (Livingston 1992, 337) as Livingston explains, by creating an aesthetic that went beyond such broad divides.

The focus on the human portrait provides one constant in Avedon's otherwise diverse oeuvre. His understanding of the portrait differs significantly from that of most other artists, however. He explains:

> A photographic portrait is a picture of someone who knows he's being photographed, and what he does with this knowledge is as much a part of the photograph as what he's wearing or how he looks. He's implicated in what's happened, and he has a certain real power over the result. We all perform. It's what we do for each other all the time, deliberately or unintentionally. It's a way of telling about ourselves in the hope of being recognized as what we'd like to be. I trust performances. Stripping them away doesn't necessarily get you closer to anything. The way someone who's being photographed presents himself to the camera, and the effect of the photographer's response on that presence, is what the making of a portrait is about. (quoted in Naylor 1988, 35)

Conceiving of the making of a photograph as a kind of performance allows for a new understanding of a medium which, for roughly a century following its invention, was believed to offer transparent and more or less unaltered views of reality. Like his fellow photographers of The New York School and unlike Hine or Evans (whose work still relies on the assumption that photographs capture reality, albeit a deliberately constructed version of it), Avedon distrusts this particular founda-

[19] Cf. Tagg 1988, 37, where he describes photography as "a model of capitalist growth in the nineteenth century." His observations hold equally true for the more recent developments of the photographic media. See also Ramamurthy, 2000, 167-74.

[20] See Beardsley 1992, 350. Avedon's portfolio (236-51) includes examples of his little known documentary and street photography done in the context of The New York School.

tion myth of photography. He prefers to think of a photo image as a subjective space allowing for multiple manipulations, beginning with the subject's consciously performing a certain version of him- or herself in front of the camera.

While the notion of portraiture as a kind of performance would not raise many eyebrows when applied to fashion photography (where performance of fantasies creating desire is the expected norm), it is important that Avedon considers it central to *all* his work in the field, including those projects he did primarily for other than commercial reasons. *In the American West, 1979-1984* was such a project. For this series some seven hundred "uncommon common men" (Beardsley 1992, 351; Avedon's term) and women were photographed, most of them coming from ordinary working backgrounds, such as ranching, bartending, mining, or – in some cases – non-working drifters or patients of a mental institution. This "collective portrait of the working-class West"(Beardsley 1992, 351) recalls August Sander's well-known socio-typological project *Antlitz der Zeit: 60 Aufnahmen deutscher Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1929). But where Sander depicted anonymous subjects in their 'natural' environments, Avedon photographed named individuals, isolated from any background other than a bare white wall, i.e., in the same way he would photograph high-class fashion models.

Despite the images' utter sobriety, their effect on viewers has been highly emotionalizing, and their reception accordingly controversial.[21] In part, this may have been due to Laura Wilson's accompanying narrative, which emphasizes again and again the economic downward spiral which affected the West in the 1970s, as in the following typical passage:

> When we first came to Butte, in 1979, it was still a one-company mining town, owned and operated by Anaconda since 1906. [...] The copper industry itself, however, was beginning to show signs of depression. Butte's young men were no longer following their fathers' footsteps into the hill [...]. (Wilson 1985, n.p.)

Such textual passages may have directed or reinforced a certain nostalgic view of the West as a part of the United States that was facing an economically precarious future. The intense effect of *In the American West*, however, is clearly owed to the photographs of individual subjects, printed in an oversized folio format so that their overpowering presence eclipses any accompanying texts.[22] It is easy to see how the photograph of "Roy Gustavson, Unemployed Copper Miner, and His Wife, Judy, Waitress, Butte, Montana, July 1, 1983" (fig. 9), for example, confronted audiences with the bleak prospect of unemployment by making it feel uncomfortably present. The average-looking couple faces the camera directly from a short distance and with very skeptical, tight-lipped expressions. Dressed in

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[21] This is less true of the 2001 exhibition in Germany than of its original venue launched in Texas in 1985. This may be due to the remoteness of the images both in terms of time and space, which facilitates their appropriation as high art, or else Avedon's status as a star photographer, which has become sacrosanct in recent years.

[22] The same aesthetic principle was used for both the 1985 and the 2001 exhibitions *In the American West*. The catalogues recreated the effect by separating the textual parts from the photographic plates which take the shape of full-page spreads.

freshly-ironed shirt and blouse and closely standing together, they seem to demand a two-to-one encounter with the viewer, who cannot avoid the couple's intensely concerned gaze. The photograph of "Red Owens, Oil Field Worker, Velma, Oklahoma, June 12, 1980" (fig. 10) suggests a close encounter between subject and viewer in a similar way. Owens, however, is shown in his dirty and worn work clothes, and his heavily stained skin and clothes tell vividly of the conditions imposed upon him by his work. Thus 'speaking for itself,' the image's overall dramatic effect is only underscored by the vacant expression on the worker's oil-stained, 'painted' face.

What gives Avedon's portraits their emotional power, and why has a project like *In the American West* caused such controversy? I would argue that this is largely because it blurs the various functions portraiture has historically performed, and therefore creates an unsettling effect in viewers who appear to find the images hard to 'read.' As a consequence, they are often considered provocative. Depicting individuals implicated in precarious economic situations, they invite viewers to react emotionally in spite of themselves, since Avedon rarely reveals neediness in his subjects. They face the viewer *composed*, often even self-absorbed, in a way more typically found in bourgeois portraiture, but lacking the security of place and status that the latter images are usually meant to imply. These are people, Avedon's images suggest, who are proud of who and what they are despite precarious circumstances, quite ready to meet strangers (like us) at eye-level. Ultimately, however, Avedon's portraits imbue their subjects with a degree of *theatricality* not usually found in working-class photography. The men and women depicted in *In the American West* perform the most unspectacular social roles, but in ways that once used to be reserved for royalty, or today's version of it, i.e., the world of fashion and celebrity. Unlike celebrities and other commodities of our present socio-economic universe, though, these people represent only themselves: average Americans struggling for a place within that universe.[23]

[23] Cf. Nancy Hall-Duncan's observation that the subjects of Avedon's commercial portraiture, "who tend to be superstar culturati and political power-dealers, also become 'symbolic of themselves' and of the cultural and political values of our society" (Hall-Duncan 1988, 35). The Avedon portraits discussed in this essay do not directly partake of such a value system lending them glamour and meaning, which may be their real provocation.

I am grateful to Roger Manley, Nicole Schröder and Herwig Friedl for their critical responses to this essay.

Fig. 9: Richard Avedon, *Roy Gustavson, Unemployed Copper Miner, and His Wife, Judy, Waitress, Butte, Montana, July 1, 1983.* Copyright © 1983 The Richard Avedon Foundation. Courtesy of The Richard Avedon Foundation.

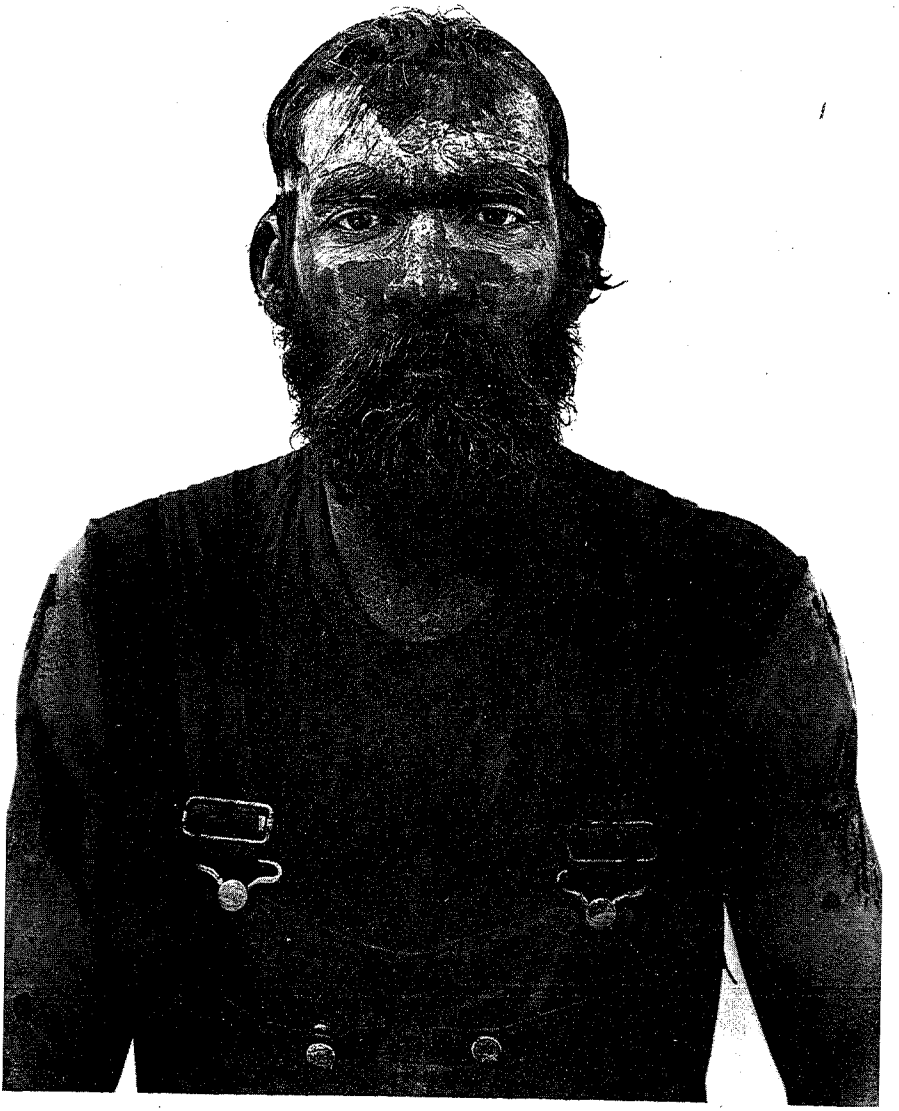

Fig. 10: Richard Avedon, *Red Owens, Oil Field Worker, Velma, Oklahoma, June 12, 1980*. Copyright © 1980 The Richard Avedon Foundation. Courtesy of The Richard Avedon Foundation.

6. Conclusion

Most photographs discussed in this essay were commissioned work and have the official character of documents. In the earlier cases of Hine and the FSA photographers this is true in a concrete, even legal sense, whereas Frank's and Avedon's photographs were made at a time when photographic portraiture was losing some of its evidential power (perhaps because people had been overexposed to the humanist rhetoric of social documentary after more than half a century of its insisting visual presence, a problem that Evans already anticipated in his work), and were regarded as documents of the human condition in a more metaphorical sense. All photographs considered here also have in common that they were done by 'itinerant photographers,' who traveled across America (or in Hine's case, New York City) to produce visual records of what they perceived as essential about their culture. More specifically, these images reveal problems so far-reaching and complex that any concrete solutions (where they existed) must have appeared weak. Consequently, even though the approaches (and thus the results) were obviously different, the records considered here amount to a particular kind of visual history. They suggest that at least throughout the 20th century, photographic portraiture in America has primarily been a space of cultural (and often quite skeptical) self-examination.

This space clearly depends on the affective potential of images. Despite their adherence to a general aesthetic of sobriety, all photographs included here appeal to viewers via the emotions, a quality portrait photography was especially successful at conveying. It also considerably widened the range of potential subjects. Roughly in the decade leading up to 1900, images of so-called common, and often even destitute, people started to be made, usually with humanist-ameliorative intent. As a result, certain tropes were established, consisting, in Abigail Solomon-Godeau's phrase, "of the depiction of the subject – and the subject's circumstances – as a pictorial spectacle usually targeted for a different audience and a different class" (Solomon-Godeau 1991, 178). The spectacular effect of portrait photography had to be suppressed, though, to insure the images' factual credibility as well as their effectiveness as indicators of certain social hierarchies. When Avedon made his series *In the American West, 1979-1984*, he refused to comply with the standard tropes of depicting people affected by misfortune, and imbued them with a kind of theatricality unseen until then. His work shows that "a portrait" is indeed "not a likeness" but always a reflection of the assumptions underlying the act of making it, and depends as much on the subject's performance in front of the camera as on the photographer's behind it, or the viewer's, interpreting it. Finally, however, the question of authority – whose image is it? – remains open. Someone who is photographed is surely "implicated in what's happened" in some important way. But it remains doubtful, when considering the historical uses of socially committed portrait photography, if she or "he has a certain real power over the result" as well, as Avedon believes. When this happens, some real change has occurred.

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